

GHALIB IN LOVE

Of the poet at his passionate best and the life and times that shaped his 'mizaaj'

■ by GULZAR



LOVE
SONNETS
OF GHALIB
TRANSLATED
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RUPA
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OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS, BOOKS on Mirza Ghalib have erupted like a rash after excessive mango-eating, and blossomed like *Lala-o-gul* all over the Indian literary landscape. Ghalib was obsessed with sweet mangoes, and always complained about the resultant rashes in his letters. His letters have become a unique landmark in Urdu prose, and his poetry a beacon of legacy. While most of his contemporaries picked up their idiom from Persian poetry, Ghalib's imagery came from the soul and soil of Indian culture, his ode to Banaras being the finest example. He invokes the intimate cadence of life through his verses, and you get a glimpse of his times in his sonnets.

Ghalib was a genius par excellence. Not that he was unaware of his own greatness. Hardly so.

*Bazicha-e-afsal hai
duniya mere aage/Hota hai
shab-o-roz tamasha mere aage*

(The world is merely a children's playground to me/ I watch its whirling display all day and night.)

But, in a moment of introspection, he did say:

*Yeh masail-e-tasavvuf,
yeh tera bayan Ghalib/Tujihe
ham vali samajhte jo na bada
khvar hota*

(The maxims of mysticism/and your sublime oration, Ghalib/We would have taken you for a saint/had you not been a wine drinker.)

"Badnaam" for his drinking and gambling habits, Ghalib was a commoner and an aristocrat at the same time. He lived in the autumn days of the Mughals, but aspired to be the "laureate" of the royal court, which was already in a shambles under the last Mughal—Bahadur Shah Zafar. The British were taking over the reins of the kingdom. Ghalib's uncle Naseeullah Beg, who had brought him up, served in the army under Lord Lentin. Ghalib inherited his pension and spent numerous years in the effort of retrieving his pension from the East India Company. He even wrote to Queen Victoria in desperation. He lived through the upheaval of 1857 and chronicled its disturbing ripples in Delhi. Ghalib's life is steeped in the defining moments of Indian history. And his personal life was not all that simple either. He had seven siblings and none survived more than 18 months.

It is in this historical as well as personal backdrop that the genius of Ghalib flourished. For any scholar, it is important to keep this in mind while interpreting his poetry. Ghalib's personality is multidimensional and that makes the interpreter's task all the more difficult. Take his couplets. They have layers after intricate layers of meanings. He was considered a difficult poet even among his contemporaries. Starting from Maulana Haali, Ghalib's disciple, to the scholars of the 20th century, many have tried to unravel Ghalib in Urdu and other languages. The exploration of the Ghalib mystique has been going on for more than a hundred years. Few poets in Urdu have had this privilege.

Now comes Sarfaraz K. Niazi's remarkable effort in English. While translating the couplets, he captures the meaning of difficult words in contemporary idiom instead of depending on the dictionaries of Ghalib's times. There is a change of identification with the meaning, as he explains in the preface. Another important departure from earlier

interpreters is that Niazi deliberately addresses the beloved as female. It has been a tradition in Urdu and Persian poetry to address the beloved as a male or to use a noncommittal gender.

I am no expert on "Ghalibiat", the studies on Ghalib, but I react purely as a student and an ardent admirer of Ghalib who has too often been a victim of scholars, who sought out the poet to establish their own identity. Niazi is a very pleasant surprise. His interpretation, though not devoid of a deliberate effort to be different, is very refreshing. He gives you the space to make your own inferences while remaining in the orbit of the couplet. At places, he draws a "Sufiana" (Sufi) meaning, using a masculine address instead of feminine—making revelations of *Ishq-e-Haqeeqi* and *Ishq-e-majaazi*.

Farman Fatehpuri gives an inspired introduction and it

is matched by Sadequain's artistic rendition.

*Sab kahan, kuchh lala(h)-o-gul mein numayaan ho gaeen,
khaak mein kya suraten hongy jo pinhaan ho gaeen.*

(Not all, only a few have become evident as tulips and roses; What images may lie in the dirt that remains hidden from us?)

Sadequain's abstract style really lives up to Ghalib's images. He also gives a brief but adequate history of Urdu and the life and times of Ghalib. Most interestingly, there is a glossary of the poet's favourite words. This book successfully, and comprehensively, introduces us to the "mizaaj" of Ghalib. ■

